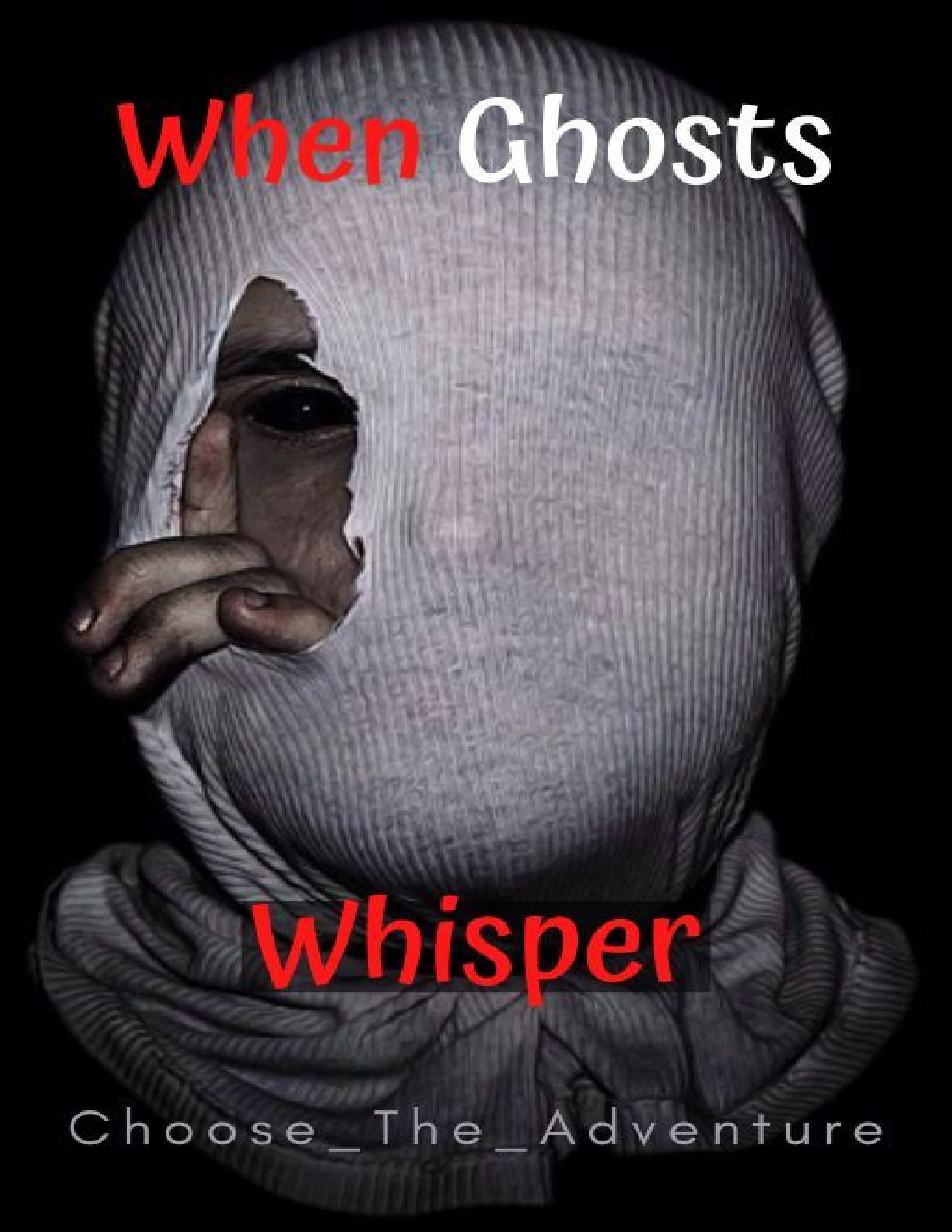
When Ghosts
Whisper
Choose_The_Adventure

1. "Kagome, Kagome"
2. "Don't Say My Name"
3. "Now You're Trapped"
4. "I'm Tired of Watching"
5. "You Are My Favorite"

"Kagome, Kagome"

The chill autumn air was crisp, almost unnaturally cold for an early August night. Leaves still clung to the trees as they lost their vivid green color, most refusing to fall off when the wind gently blew against them. Those that did shake loose fell shakily onto the pavement below, crushed underfoot as the rush hour crowd grew thicker along the sidewalks and churning like blood rushing through a vein.

The city was definitely alive as the throngs of people and vehicles surged across its roads, beating steady to some unheard drum as the flow of traffic stopped and started again, forever repeating the rhythm until the sun completely sank beneath the horizon. With night fully eclipsing the cityscape, the crowds began to thin as people went about their separate ways to go home or dive into entertainment venues.

One man stood alone despite the crowds around him, dressed warmly for the night time chill with a long black scarf wrapped around his neck and lower face to protect against the winds that occasionally turned harsh through the tight streets of the city. His dark eyes looked up to the light-polluted sky, straining to see the flickering stars above the veil before turning his gaze earthward and walking through the groups of people.

He had a job to finish tonight and then he could spend the weekend however he pleased. At least, that's what his father told him.

It was a simple cleaning job, something that should be done in only an hour or so depending on the mess. But he liked these kinds of jobs. They paid quite a bit of money; money that he could use to fuel his pachinko habits and feed his alcohol addiction.

Lifting a hand to adjust the black scarf, he swiftly tucked the exposed hand back into the jacket pocket to keep warm as the wind picked back up, tossing about his dark hair dyed with small streaks of crimson red. Stifling a

shudder, the man ducked into an apartment building and pressed the 'UP' button to summon the elevator.

The cleaning job was the last thing to do for the year and it would signify the end of a long list of chores his father had put him up to. A full weekend off would be nice to have, especially after the endless job requests.

The elevator door opened and the man walked into the car, holding the door open for another tenant of the building before asking the floor they needed to get to. They said the same floor as his destination.

Silently riding the car up to the designated floor, the man held the door open for the other tenant once more before turning away from where they went, following the numbers until he stood in front of the right apartment. Pulling off the long scarf and exposing his mouth and neck to the chill air, the man shuddered a little before folding the scarf over his left arm. It was a nice scarf that was a generous donation from another cleaning job, the owner gifting it without a qualm, and the man really didn't want to get it dirty.

Knocking on the door gently, the occupant called out for the man to wait a moment before the bolt lock slid open, the door opening gently to reveal a haggard looking man.

His dark hair was unkempt and hung low over his tired eyes, the dark hues gazing at the man on the other side of the door with suspicion.

"Hello, Ichimatsu."

The job was easier than he expected it to be, almost noiseless from start to finish. Despite the mess that the apartment was in, there wasn't much of a cleanup to do when the man was finished. This 'Ichimatsu' person had run into the bathroom and grabbed something from underneath the sink before the man chased him down, a clean blade cutting into the front of his neck and sliding through.

The man yawned as he dumped the body into the tub and arranged the knife that he had reached for in his hands, drawing it across the cut he had

already made before letting the hand and knife clatter to the tiled ground. He started to scrub up the splatter that put the actual death closer to the door, taking his time and humming a song from his childhood that always made butterflies flutter in his stomach. Using a garbage bag from Ichimatsu's stash, the man threw out the bloody towels and used wash cloth after he finished cleaning up the bathroom.

The bird in a cage

When, oh when will it come out?

In the light of dawn,

the crane and turtle fell.

Who is it that stands behind me?

Over and over, the man quietly sung the words as a smile grew on his face, standing up from his chore on the last note and admiring the handiwork he'd done. Taking out a cheap flip phone, the man took several photos and sent them to a number he had memorized before breaking the phone on its hinge and tossing it into the bag along with the remaining bloody rags. With the cleaning all finished, he took his time to look around the apartment.

The apartment was mostly tidied up in the more public rooms, some convenience store food containers left out from days ago along with drink cans of tea or coffee. Papers were scattered everywhere with writing on every exposed side, several sentences crossed out or connected to other parts of the paper by a pencil line. The man didn't care what the papers were about.

This 'Ichimatsu' that he had been sent to clean up was some kind of shut in, or maybe he was a failing author. It didn't matter anymore.

Pulling open the dresser in the bedroom, the man picked through the folded clothes carefully while keeping his hand tucked inside his jacket sleeve. There were a lot of purple-colored items, but a dark purple shirt caught his eye near the bottom of the drawer. Pulling it out, he could feel the softness

through the tough jacket fabric and snapped it open with a few shakes to reveal a long sleeve shirt with a bottom hem that would rest just below his waist. A small frown tugged at his lips before he lay the shirt over the crook of his arm, moving towards the closet to see about any kind of coat or pants this random guy wore.

His eyes were drawn towards a long coat that was dyed a crimson red among the sea of blue and purple overcoats, the color looking a little faded but otherwise fine.

Shedding the jacket he was currently wearing and stripping off the faded salmon-colored shirt underneath, the man took notice of the basketball-sized bruise spreading across the left side of his ribs in the closet door mirror, pausing his movements to study the ugly thing more closely. It was from his last job, the guy clearly anticipating his arrival and blindsiding him with a wooden baseball bat before he could react. He grunted as he remembered the job, furrowing his brow in frustration as the guy had eluded him for most of the night after the initial hit before being cornered near the man's home. The screams were satisfying to listen to, even as echoes in his head, as the knife plunged down into his torso and arms, slicing through muscles and tendons to prevent the guy from running away again.

'

Big brother, stop!

' were his last words, confusing the man for a moment before the knife found its mark in his throat, silencing the confusing words that he had been screaming. He didn't have any brothers, or any real family at all...except for Father.

Shaking himself from the past, he pulled the purple shirt on over his head and looked at his reflection in the mirror. The shirt hugged his toned form quite comfortably with the sleeves rested just over his wrists and the hem settling just below his hips. The neckline was a little longer than what he was used to, but the mock turtleneck hid the scars on his neck easily.

Shrugging on the red jacket and admiring his new clothes in the mirror for a moment longer, he wrapped the long black scarf around his neck and lower face once more before stuffing the old clothes into the blood rag bag, cinching it closed and carrying it down with him as he left the building. Dumping the bag into the garbage pile, he looked back up at the night sky as a smile settled on his face.

He was done. The five tedious cleaning jobs had been completed just as Father asked him to do, so all that was left was to go home, get paid, and drink the weekend away until there was another job available.

"You got new clothes."

The man clicked his tongue against his front teeth, curling up a lip in annoyance as he closed the room door behind him, carefully removing the scarf and hanging it up on the standing coat hanger before removing the red long coat and hanging it over the scarf.

The speaker barely looked over his shoulder at him, sitting comfortably in an armchair with a newspaper laying open over his crossed legs while a cigarette smoked between his disapproving frown. His black hair was neatly combed as it usually was, a perfect line parting the hair along the left side of his head and letting the hair sweep towards the right side. A scar reinforced the part, the skin raised a little with a thick pale line extending just past the hair line.

"Fuck off, old man," The newcomer spat distastefully before slumping into the couch nearby, a cold beer can in his hand from the kitchen by the front door, "You sent me to finish up a job, and I did it as you instructed."

"With an added bonus."

"Who fucking cares?! No one's done anything since you sent me on the first job, so who's gonna give a fuck now?" The beer can hissed open before the cold liquid was sucked down the man's parched throat.

"If you get caught, I'm leaving you behind, Osomatsu."

"Fuck off, Tougou," Osomatsu narrowed his eyes towards the older man before taking another long swig of beer, "Besides, I've been just as careful with the last job as I was with the first. They've all been suicides, or some shit."

"How does it feel to be rid of them?" The older man, Tougou, barely folded down the newspaper corner to look at Osomatsu.

"The jobs? Feels great. The people? Didn't really care about them anyway," Osomatsu slammed the remaining beer down before crushing the can with his hand and tossing it towards the garbage can, hearing the satisfying 'click' as the can landed in the target, "They abandoned me before you took me in, so who gives a shit."

"It almost sounds like I should find more challenging jobs for you."

Osomatsu shot a glare over towards Tougou, meeting the older man's steel-gray eyes in a challenge.

There was a heavy pause before Tougou looked away first, "Very well. The weekend is yours."

Osomatsu lay sprawled out face down on his bed, his chin propped up on his left forearm while the television remote sat in his right hand, the thumb pressing up through the channels absentmindedly. The bed was messy, sheets tossed about with a comforter resting over the mess and one of his pillows laying discarded on the floor while his feet shuffled underneath the other pillow.

If he had known that the weekend would be this boring, he would've taken another job.

Giving a heavy groan, Osomatsu tossed the remote onto the carpeted floor before flipping himself over and staring at the ceiling. The red sweatpants

and black tank top were enough to regulate his temperature in the cold room, the silence of the bedroom filled with the quiet snowy static coming from the empty channel he had left the television on.

He had already gone through his first case of beer for the weekend, blown most of his money on failed pachinko tries, and still had a day-and-a-half left before Monday arrived. Who would've thought that a nice relaxing weekend after a year-long stint of cleaning jobs would turn into the longest wait of his life?

The buzzing of his personal cell phone dragged his attention from the ceiling towards the bedside table, the mobile device charging from a nearby wall outlet. Yawning while sitting up, Osomatsu crawled over to the table to see an unfamiliar number light up the display screen. Sliding over the green 'ANSWER' button, he brought the phone to his ear, expecting to hear Tougou's voice on the other line.

"

Big brother, stop!

" The scream almost startled Osomatsu, bringing the phone away from his ear to keep his inner ear from ringing at the loud volume. The voice stirred a memory as the call clicked dead, the phone replaced with a knife while the bed underneath him morphed into a pathetically sobbing man clothed in a yellow hoodie, blood-stained from the several stab wounds in his chest and arms.

"Ah, shit..." Osomatsu set the phone down and fell back onto his bed, "I'm more tired than I thought..."

It wasn't even nighttime yet, and already his mind was slipping into an exhausted state without him realizing it.

He pulled himself off of the bed and trudged towards the kitchen, ripping open the second case of beer he bought for himself and grabbing a can off the top, popping the seal and chugging the alcohol down. Glancing over towards the living room where Tougou usually sat when he was home,

Osomatsu was pleased to see the armchair empty with the daily newspaper folded neatly on top of the back. Pressing the cold can against his neck, he strode towards the couch and turned on the television, flipping through the channels until the afternoon news report showed up.

"

...several suspects have been identified, but there's still no answer of why this heinous crime occurred. We'll bring you live updates as the story unfolds,

" The male news anchor commented on the city shooting that happened a week ago, most people believing it to be some kind of criminal activity. His thin lips curved downward as he continued speaking, "

Next, we'll cover the fatal stabbing of a familial nature.

"

Osomatsu's ears perked up, pulling the can away mid-swallow to focus on the news story. He knew his tracks were well covered, so his interest was piqued as the news anchor took a breath before continuing.

"

Some say that you can't choose your family. Well, that is the truth in this case when a body was discovered earlier this year,

" A still picture of a man looking similar to Osomatsu appeared on the screen, the bust shot including the details of his green sweater, "

Choromatsu Matsuno, age 29, was found dead in his family home, appearing to be stabbed to death with a hastily written suicide note under his hand. Dying in a similar fashion shortly after was his older brother, Karamatsu Matsuno, age 29,

" Another still picture replaced the one of Choromatsu, this new one showing a man happily smiling to the camera while holding the earpiece of

some sunglasses between his teeth, a black leather jacket easily seen in the photo, "

who was commented to be 'painful' to others, but never to the point where he was considered at risk for suicide. Police have had long standing questions about these two murders, and continue to stockpile the evidence as more victims surface in this horrid family affair.

"

Osomatsu was leaning forward on the couch, the beer nearly forgotten as it started to slip through his fingers. He looked horrified at the two pictures identifying his first two victims. He was sure that he was careful about them! Osomatsu knew how to get away with it, and left both obvious and subtle clues that clearly pointed towards suicide because they were unhappy with life. They were NEETs, for fucks sake! No one would miss them! So why was this nobody news anchor reporting on this!?

"

The family was still in grieving when the third brother of this quintuplet set was taken. Todomatsu Matsuno was leaving his work when he was accosted by an unknown assailant, defending himself as shown by the bruises along his arms and chest. However, he also fell to this murderer's knife and was cast aside in a pile of burnable garbage before a fire mysteriously started just moments later.

"

Osomatsu growled as he glared at the news anchor, the digital dark eyes glaring right back at him as the camera refused to budge from his face. It was the one mistake that Osomatsu had made on his cleaning jobs, and he paid for it with the scars on his body.

"

Fearing for their lives, the surviving two brothers sent off their parents to live out the rest of their lives in safety, far from the reach of the targeted

murderer. No such luck would follow them, however, as Jyushimatsu Matsuno would sacrifice his own life to keep his remaining older brother safe by drawing his attention away long enough for Ichimatsu Matsuno to run.

"

Osomatsu slammed a fist down on the arm of the couch. That slippery sonuvabitch was a fucking diversion?! He could've had two jobs done in one night if he had been paying just a bit more attention to that room.

"

The murderer would soon find out where the last victim had taken shelter, swiftly ending his life and changing the scene to make it appear as another tasteless suicide.

"

The beer can slipped from his fingertips, falling to the floor and spilling what little beer remained as Osomatsu stared at the photograph showing on the television screen. A white bathroom, near immaculate if not for the bloody mess that lay in the tub. Ichimatsu's head sagged against his chest, the clean cut on his neck barely visible from the photograph.

This was impossible. He had done everything right! There's no way he was found out this quickly! Not for all of them!!

"

But who exactly is this murderer that slaughtered his five brothers in cold blood, and why did he only go after his family?

You would know that, wouldn't you...Osomatsu?

" The news anchor's frown twisted into a grin, his thin lips pulling back to reveal a row of sharp teeth. Osomatsu grabbed the remote and turned the television off, his heart violently hammering away in his chest as he raced towards his room and dove for the charging phone. As his fingers shakily

tapped on the screen, he couldn't find anything about the murders being discovered nor anything about the news channel that he had been watching. The show didn't even exist as far as the internet was concerned, and the news anchor was a nobody.

"

Osomatsu,

" The news anchor's voice called from the television still on in the bedroom, the snowy static arranging into his visage, "

How could you call yourself a model citizen when you've killed your own brethren? Wouldn't your parents be ashamed of you.

"

"Shut up!" He screamed at the TV, pulling the power cord out from the wall and sitting heavily on his bed. The childhood rhyme wormed its way into his head, the tune being sung faintly from somewhere within the room as the tune he loved was twisted into a flat chord.

The bird in a cage

When, oh when will it come out?

In the light of dawn,

the crane and turtle fell.

Who is it that stands behind me?

Osomatsu swallowed a gulp of air as he frantically looked up how to deal with a potential haunting, knowing that it wasn't the beer that was doing this to him. His vision swirled as he tried to fight the sudden fatigue draining his energy, seeing his surroundings melt into darkness despite the bright afternoon sun streaming through his window. His bare feet padded against the ground, feeling something squelch between his toes before he

recognized the tackiness of oxidizing blood, keeping his eyes focused ahead of him.

"You don't scare me, bitch," He called out into the darkness, "I've gone through worse than anything you can put me through! I've survived it all!"

A face suddenly appeared in front of his, the figure almost completely transparent as the pointed grin widened before the head pulled back, revealing a hand winding up for a hit. Osomatsu jumped back and leaned away from the attack, seeing the air vibrate from the knives carving out the space right in front of his chest, his eyes widening in realization at the knives seemed to be attached to the other person's hands as Osomatsu stepped back further to avoid another swipe with the other hand. The ghostly figure grinned wide, revealing his sharpened teeth as his dark pupils narrowed, his mouth opening wide to let a ghostly tongue unfurl and swipe across his pointed teeth.

"Fuck off!" Osomatsu clenched a fist and took a step forward, intending to throw his fist at the head of the person. Skin met skin...and passed through. A deathly chill raced through Osomatsu's nerves as he pulled his arm back, watching in growing horror as the transparent skin he had torn through hung for a moment before reforming, the ghost's eyes partially closing in satisfaction as his pointed mouth widened once more into a wicked grin.

"Silly older brother," The ghost cackled in a familiar way, "Lost your memories and now you'll lose yourself."

"I don't know you as a brother!" The man yelled back, bracing for another swing before the ghost shifted back, letting it miss him completely and falling back further as Osomatsu started chasing him through the drying blood, "You all abandoned me!"

"Is that what Tougou told you?"

Osomatsu glanced towards his right and dove to the ground as his eyes registered two revolver barrels aimed right at him, the shots firing and splashing into the bloody floor near Osomatsu's knee and shoulder. He felt sluggish as he stood back up, backpedalling away from the second figure as

the two revolvers dissolved into its arms, allowing the figure's face to be seen. Osomatsu recognized Choromatsu and Karamatsu from the pictures on that news report, despite their eyes dark around the outside.

"Should've figured a dirty liar would turn you against us," Choromatsu shrugged before flexing his fingers again, the knives clinking against each other as he looked towards Karamatsu before swivelling his thin pupils to the blood-soaked man.

"Should've realized that you wouldn't remember what happened," Karamatsu responded to Choromatsu's taunt, standing next to his brother as they both gave a deep frown at almost the same time.

"The fuck are you talking about..." Osomatsu heard a hiss behind him, glancing over his shoulder before rolling away from a large snake streaking towards him with its fangs bared and jaw wide open. Snapping its jaw shut where he used to stand, it recoiled back into the body of another figure who simply rolled his shoulder as if unamused by the whole situation.

"Of course he's not gonna remember. We should still try, but he'll probably be killed at this rate," The new ghost had a lighter voice, the tone almost in a sigh of disapproval.

"I've killed you assholes once, and I can do it again!" Osomatsu sneered as he backed away from the three ghosts, feeling uncomfortable as the blood clinging to his clothes began to harden. The ghosts wore the faces of the people he'd killed, with the new one registering as Todomatsu...the one responsible for the scars on Osomatsu's neck.

The song was still being hummed in the background, wordless.

The bird in a cage

When, oh when will it come out?

In the light of dawn,

the crane and turtle fell.

Who is it that stands behind me?

"Stop it! Don't ruin that song!" Osomatsu yelled out towards the darkness, holding his hands over his ears to shut out the minor key tune, closing his eyes in frustration as the humming grew louder. It echoed all around him before the source of the hum could be heard from somewhere in front of him, the echoes completely dying out and leaving the child-like voice humming alone.

He slowly opened his eyes to see that he wasn't in his bedroom or the darkness. Moonlight streamed in through the open curtains, gently cascading down onto the short green carpeted floor and washing over the duvet covering of the futon he was sitting in. A quick glance around showed five others laying on either side of him, all of them dressed in similar pajamas and sound asleep. Bringing his hands up to his face, Osomatsu saw that they were several times smaller than they should be, reaching down to pull at his clothing. The fabric was no longer blood-soaked, or even dyed red. They were the same pajamas that the others were wearing.

"What the...?" His voice sounded a little higher pitched, making him grab at his throat to make sure nothing was affecting it.

Standing up quickly, Osomatsu walked towards the window and pulled the curtains back to see his childhood reflection staring back at him with wide eyes.

"Big brother...?" The humming had stopped and whoever spoke drew his attention towards a small futon near the corner of the room, pushed far enough over to be out of the way of foot traffic. A small girl rose to a sitting position, rubbing her eyes sleepily while her mouth opened in a yawn. She wore a nightgown that was a few sizes too large for her current figure, the white fabric catching some of the moonlight, "...what's wrong?"

Nothing, you little shit...

Osomatsu thought viciously while his mouth moved to form different words, "It's nothing. I'm sorry that I woke you up..."

"I'm thirsty..." She curled a fist near her mouth, starting to stand up before Osomatsu found himself carefully moving towards the child.

"Let's get you a small drink, and then back to bed."

"Okay," The little girl smiled as he held out his hand, taking it gently before being led out of the bedroom. Osomatsu's eyes widened as he faintly remembered walking down this staircase before, taking each step slowly so the girl could keep up with him. Some small part of him didn't want to see what happened next, but his feet continued without any input.

One step.

Then another.

"There we go," He smiled at her when she made it to the bottom of the staircase, turning towards the kitchen while holding her small hand.

"Osomatsu...I don't like Mr. Tougou," The girl frowned as she spoke in a small voice, as if she was afraid to say anything in the silence, "He makes you scared."

Osomatsu could feel a chill race down his spine, growing rigid before shaking his head a little, "He's not that bad. He's only here for a little bit longer and then we won't have to see him ever again."

The kitchen was dark and Osomatsu let go of the girl's hand to turn on the light while pulling up a chair to climb onto the counter for a glass. She wobbled over towards the chair, trying to keep it steady so he wouldn't fall. Giving a victorious noise when his hand grabbed a plastic cup, he quickly went to the sink and filled it up with water before carefully climbing down the chair.

"Here you go."

"Ah, Osomatsu. There you are," An oddly familiar voice called out from the doorway, drawing both of their attention towards the man propping himself up on the door jamb. The hairstyle and style of clothing instantly marked

him as Tougou, "I thought I heard some noise so I wanted to see if you were okay."

"Yeah, I'm fine...just getting some water," Osomatsu watched through his own eyes as his hand reached out for the little girl's shoulder, pulling her back towards him as the man stepped closer.

"Finish up and I'll escort you back to bed," Tougou stopped a few steps away from the two, his eyes never leaving Osomatsu's hues.

"Leave him alone, you big meanie! Stop making my brother scared!" The little girl spread out her arms as wide as they would go, drawing Tougou's attention to her. A slightly amused look crossed his face.

"He's just scared of the dark, sweetie. I told your parents that I would take good care of you all while I was here."

"He's scared of

you

!"

A dark look swept over Tougou's features before his eyes snapped back to Osomatsu, "I'm hurt, Osomatsu...I thought you gave me a promise about that."

"I didn't say anything!" His voice shook as Tougou roughly shoved the girl to the floor behind him, torn between going to her aid and running away. Osomatsu's mind started to remember what happened, travelling to the earliest memory he had and watching silently as the scene started to unfold.

Tougou grabbed Osomatsu's arm harshly, the familiar dark sneer spreading his lips wide, "You knew the price."

"Leave him alone or I'll call Daddy!" The girl had made it back to her feet and shoved the back of Tougou's leg, trying to heroically push him to the ground. The knife caught the light as Tougou's other arm brought it out from its hiding spot, changing direction instantly and slamming the handle

into her throat. The little girl dropped to the ground senseless, her dark hair spreading out around her head while the nightgown settled into place over her.

"No, don't!" Osomatsu's eyes filled with tears as he tried to shove Tougou away from the girl, his heart torn between fear of the man and the need to protect the girl.

"I'm not going to do it," Tougou huffed, shoving the knife into Osomatsu's hand and forcing him to hold it, "You are."

"No...!"

"You broke your promise, so it's only fair that you deal the killing blow. Your entire family was at stake, and you've just killed them with your hands," Tougou leaned over Osomatsu's small frame, his mouth close to his ear, "Do it yourself, or I'll make you watch what I do to them...one by one."

Mentally, Osomatsu cried out at Tougou, both cursing his name and apologizing for not stopping the girl from doing this to herself. His eyes were full of tears as he remembered everything, shattering the lies of what he had been told day after day, that his parents hated him for what he had done, that Tougou took him to keep him safe. Anger raged in his eyes as the child Osomatsu whimpered, raising the knife above his head and driving it into the girl's chest, pulling it out and stabbing it back down in a different place.

Each sickening crunching sound that resounded in her torso brought back a new memory: the first lesson on cleaning up messes like the one he had made, how to trust Tougou completely, discarding the family that still loved him and moving out of the city with Tougou, his first job.

The knife wedged itself deep into the girl's chest, leaving Osomatsu panting above her corpse as he straddled her tiny body.

"...you remembered for a little bit, but I'm not sure it was enough."

He flinched as he looked up towards the speaker, seeing the ghosts from before smirking down at him as he stumbled back off the corpse, the knife still lodged in her caved-in chest. It was still only the three, making him slightly wonder where the other two were before he heard footsteps behind him, squishing down on the blood covered floor.

"I'd be lying if I said I was disappointed," Choromatsu waved one of his knife hands in the air dismissively, his thin pupils meeting Osomatsu before looking behind the man. Osomatsu risked looking behind him, seeing the little girl walking hand in hand with the news anchor from the segment. The news anchor shrugged his shoulders and his form rippled like a mirage on the sand, shifting into the victim Osomatsu knew as Ichimatsu before Choromatsu spoke again, "Well?"

The girl looked up to Ichimatsu before looking over at Osomatsu, a childish grin appearing on her face, "You forgot me."

Osomatsu's heart thudded violently in his chest, his hand gripping the shirt fabric above his sternum as his breath was ripped from his lungs. Collapsing onto the ground, he reached out towards the little girl, a desperation in his eyes as he fought to take a breath. She lowered herself down in front of him, the same innocent smile still on her lips.

"It would've been okay if you remembered my name."

"No...! I...know you...!" His vision was starting to fade around the outer edges of his vision, slowly narrowing to a tunnel as he took in a breath, "You're..."

Osomatsu's mind frantically struggled to come up with a name, her smiling face bringing back faded memories that were buried for too long. The grin, laughter, and cheerful disposition were so familiar but felt so foreign to him.

Who was this girl to him? She had called him her big brother, but he couldn't remember anything else before that fateful night.

He closed his eyes, rolling onto his back and struggling to take a deep breath.

"Osomatsu!" A faint voice called out from a deep memory, the same little girl leaning over him with her face twisted in worry as he lay in the sweltering heat of the summer sun, heat exhaustion depriving him of any kind of energy. She grabbed at his shirt and dragged him into the shade of a tree only a few feet away, grunting from the exertion before popping open her water bottle that was slung over her shoulder. Shoving the mouthpiece between his lips, the girl squeezed the sides of the bottle to force out a few drops of water.

Realizing that her water bottle was still full, Osomatsu greedily sucked through the mouthpiece, taking in as much water as he could before realizing that the bottle had emptied in a few sips.

"Don't die on me, big brother!" Her face leaned over him once more as he removed the bottle from his mouth, large tears welling up within her eyes that threatened to splash down onto his face. His mind cleared of the heavy fog as he reached up and gently placed a hand against her cheek.

"I promise I won't...

...(y/n)."

Osomatsu took in a deep breath without laboring for it, coughing at the exertion his diaphragm made before realizing that he was laying in his bed once more. The fading sunlight struggled to reach into his window, throwing the last red rays of day before slowly disappearing behind the cityscape. Osomatsu sat up in bed, looking around wide-eyed at his own room.

Discarded beer cans lay empty on the floor and bedside table with the television remote thrown near the door. His phone was still plugged in and fully charged, showing no new messages or missed calls. The television was unplugged from the wall outlet, and his clothes weren't dirtied in any way apart from being wrinkled by his tossing and turning in his sleep.

There was a soft sound from the living room, muted talking before a faint laugh track could be heard.

Tougou was home.

Osomatsu shook his head as he straightened up, stretching and yawning while pulling down his tank top from where it had rolled up on his chest. He had to have fallen asleep at some point, kicking the remote back towards the bed as he left his room and making his way towards the living room, ruffling his messy hair with a hand.

Tougou was sitting in the armchair, his leg propped up on the other with the newspaper resting in his lap. He was dressed down from his usual day clothes, which meant that he was planning on staying home for the remainder of the night. Osomatsu barely glanced over at him before moving to the kitchen for a glass of water to soothe the pounding hangover that was starting to develop.

"I see that you've already gone through most of your beer for the weekend," Tougou commented without turning around, "If I didn't know any better, I'd say that you're turning into an alcoholic."

"Fuck off, old man," Osomatsu snapped as he brought the water glass to his lips, feeling to cool liquid wash down his parched throat. Filling up the glass again, he turned towards the television with suspicion, watching the characters of a drama show enact a humorous scene to which a robber was trying to steal from a store. The employees weren't having any of it and tried to treat him as a regular customer.

Static filled the screen for a moment before he winced in pain, slamming the glass down on the counter as he tried to keep his balance.

"I told you that you shouldn't let yourself get carried away after a job."

Osomatsu felt anger at his words, the emotion amplified as he eyed the kitchen knife rack, "You've been telling me things all my life. The fuck makes this any different?"

"Because I finished up the job that you failed to do," The newspaper crinkled as the page was turned, "Certain people were trying to find out what happened at one of your earlier jobs."

'

Certain people

'...

"But there's no need to worry," Tougou sighed in resignation, "They didn't pose much of a challenge."

"Picking on old people again?" Osomatsu's hand twitched towards the knife rack, his index finger briefly touching the twenty-centimeter chef knife handle before falling to the counter again. He downed the second glass of water in two gulps.

"They're the easiest targets. Especially when they're grieving a missing family."

Osomatsu's eyes glared at Tougou, immediately picking up what wasn't being said. The nightmare from earlier in the day rose to the surface, scenes playing in his head that he wasn't entirely sure had happened. As his vision cleared, he saw a little girl standing next to Tougou's chair with a saddened look on her face.

No...calling her a 'little girl' sounded wrong, especially when she looked to be Osomatsu's age...maybe a little younger than him. Her dark hair had grown out to her waist, messy and unkempt like she had no reason to deal with the mess anymore, but the white nightgown easily fit her frame now. The bloodstains...the wounds that he created...remained.

(Y/n).

She looked over when her name rose to the surface of his thoughts, making eye contact before his hand grabbed the handle of the knife. Osomatsu didn't even fight against the movement, pulling out the tool and cautiously

walking towards Tougou's chair, his eyes fixed on the woman who called herself his 'little sister'.

"Damn, Tougou...you're just an expert on ripping families apart, aren't you?" Osomatsu switched his glare from the bleeding female towards the older man relaxed in his chair, his hand tightening on the handle of the knife as he stepped into range. His skin prickled as he felt (y/n) lay her hands on his arms, rubbing his skin lightly before reaching down to his hands. Osomatsu closed his eyes as he felt an unnatural anger rise in his gut, the emotion rising to such a degree that he had to restrain himself from immediately stabbing the knife downwards. Clenching his jaw tightly, Osomatsu realized that it wasn't just one person's anger...it felt like he had taken on several people's anger and rage, emotions that they had been harboring for years.

"From what I recall," Tougou turned his head just enough to glare at Osomatsu from the corner of his eye, "You're the one that started it."

"Yeah, true..." A smirk formed on Osomatsu's lips, "But you're the one paying for it."

The knife moved too quickly for Tougou to react, the blade biting deep into his throat and pinning him to the back of the chair, air gurgling out from the large cut splitting the esophagus in two. Blood bubbled up and squirted out as the knife was pulled away, an ugly whistling forming as Tougou tried to suck air down his throat. The newspaper fell from his lap as he struggled to stand up and face Osomatsu, blood now pouring from the enlarged wound and falling thickly onto the chair's arms and carpeted floor.

"Oso...!" The unnatural wheeze in Tougou's voice was haunting to hear, the accused man taking a step back as Tougou reached out towards his attacker, his hand grasping for anything to hold onto. Finding nothing to hold him up, his weight shifted forward and Tougou fell onto the chair, slamming his jaw into the backpiece with a sickening crunch before sliding down to the ground. The carpet made a slick slapping noise as the dead body fell onto the pool of blood that was seeping into the fibers, spreading wider as more of the carpet tried to absorb the thick fluid.

All at once, the anger and rage Osomatsu had felt towards the dead man fled his body, the man he once called 'father' laying lifeless in his own lifeblood. He would've thought that some kind of sadness would settle, but nothing swayed his mind to think that Tougou's death was a loss. Instead, Osomatsu started to feel a strange sense of relief as his hand grew numb, the bloody knife slipping through his fingers as he looked down to see a slim pair of hands holding onto his own. The hands brought his blood-splattered hand up to a pale cheek, pressing it against the cold surface and drawing his eyes towards the pair of dark hues looking back at him.

"(Y/n)..." As he muttered her name, a well of emotions opened up and tears surged down his cheeks as the guilt, fear, and anger from long ago ran their course through his system, "...I'm so sorry...!"

She didn't say anything, only offering a smile in return as she kept his hand against her cheek. Five other hands lay themselves up along his arm, drawing his attention towards the ghosts of the brothers he had abandoned and killed with his own hands. They didn't look at him with the hate and anger from before, only offering comforting smiles before their forms started to fade. Osomatsu tried to reach out to them with his other hand, tears flooding his eyes before his brothers completely disappeared.

"Please...don't leave me...!" Osomatsu's throat felt tight as he realized that (y/n), his little sister, had released his hand, "Let me pay for what I did to you!"

He frantically reached for her retreating hand as she turned to walk away from him, startled that he could hold it before clinging to it tighter. She looked back towards him with a smile, her fingers intertwining with his for a moment.

She turned towards him, Osomatsu's dark eyes catching the brutal stab wounds that partially collapsed her chest, "We will be here when it's your turn."

Osomatsu's eyes widened before closing in resignation, a small smile settling on his lips as he let go of her hand. When he looked back to where she was standing, he only saw Tougou's corpse. He let out a sigh before he

began to sing softly to himself as he went to the kitchen, reaching underneath the sink for some cleaning supplies as the smile on his lips grew bigger.

The bird in a cage

When, oh when will it come out?

In the light of dawn,

the crane and turtle fell.

Who is it that stands behind me?

"Don't Say My Name"

"Watch where you're going!"

A rough shove knocked a young woman to the ground, her eyes aimlessly staring straight ahead as her hands quickly grabbed onto the object tethered to her left wrist.

"Damn broad."

The voice's owner walked on, the woman not moving until she couldn't hear them anymore.

Biting on the inside of her bottom lip, she slowly felt out the ground underneath her and moved into a more comfortable position as she raised herself back to her feet. The object in her hand clacked against the ground harshly before her grip softened and lifted it to hover a few centimeters above the pavement.

"...good morning to you, too..." Her voice was quiet as she reoriented herself, finding the curb of the sidewalk and continuing in the direction that she was going before being rudely pushed.

This wasn't the first time that she had been bullied by someone walking by, but she couldn't afford the delay of an instigation today. It was All Hallow's Eve, and that meant that she needed to get home before she could become a target for those living in the world.

Quickly walking through the near-vacant streets, her seeing cane kept her from falling over the stationary obstacles before she took the familiar turn that led to her apartment, using the elevator to ascend. Her house key was always hanging around her neck, the warm metallic object pulled from underneath the neck of her shirt and slid home into the lock before the woman opened the door a little.

"--with the rain staying for the next few days."

"Sounds like trick-or-treating is going to be a bit of a challenge this year, Charlie," A female voice laughed out before the male spoke up again.

"Well, Rachel, I can think of a few people that will be out and about, regardless of the weather. Never underestimate people's willpower."

The woman locked the door shut behind her and hung up her seeing cane on its assigned hook, using her mind's eye to move freely around the almost-bare apartment. She knew where the couch was, where the television was in relation to it, and how to navigate the tight turns without her hands 'seeing' for her.

"Moving onto Halloween safety, it is to be noted that you should report any suspicious activity immediately to your local police authority," The female reporter called out calmly, "So, ensure that your young kids stay by your side."

The woman reached up and opened her cupboard, reaching a little higher and grabbing a cold mug before moving over to the fridge. With the droning newscasters continuing their annual warning, she took in a deep breath and slowly released it as she filled the mug with filtered water.

"I guess this is the first year you're going to be with me, huh?" Her voice was quiet in the apartment, "Well...I don't know if you can hear me, but I was told that you can be a handful."

Nothing responded to her words, the television continuing its droning as the program began to switch from the afternoon news to some show that would fill the dead air before the evening news turned on.

"Grandpa said that you were once a respectable man," She continued as she carefully placed the mug in the microwave, closing the door securely and turning the adjacent knob to set a warming timer, "I mean...I don't know much about our family's history, but he allowed me to take care of you when I was able to visit him...and let me continue to take care of you after his death."

Her voice dropped in volume as she spoke, closing her eyes as a sad expression settled on her face before something sparked in her mind and perked up her attitude.

"That's right! It's almost time for your ritual, isn't it?" The microwave dinged its completion and she lifted the warmed mug full of water out of the appliance, setting it down on the counter as her fingers walked over to the large collection of tea. Deftly picking out one of her favorites, she began steeping the tea as she moved towards the couch, "I've heard Grandpa say that you enjoy what I do, so I hope you're looking forward to that every day from me. Of course, if it gets too much for you, I'll make it intermittent instead."

A warm feeling flooded her heart, her body taking in a deep breath reflexively as a smile spread across her lips.

"Then...I'll start."

Setting the mug down on the table next to the couch, the woman moved towards a new addition to her apartment: a small bedside table with only a glass jar decorating it. She couldn't see what was inside, but had been told that it was something important for her to hold onto.

Lifting the glass jar up carefully, she moved over to the couch after grabbing the folded cloth that lay just in front of the jar.

Humming a soft song, she began to rub the cloth over the surface of the jar, feeling the warm feeling begin to spread throughout her body just like it had always done when she did this in her grandfather's home. A smile settled on her lips as she mindlessly stared ahead, her hands meticulously cleaning the jar as the song continued in her throat.

Minutes passed and she stopped humming when the song ended, setting the jar down in her lap gently as she reached for her mug, her fingers hooking around the handle easily. Swallowing a sip of the obviously over-steeped tea, she shook her head in frustration at herself before placing the jar and cloth back in their new locations.

Fúath...

The woman froze in place, the word no more than a whisper on the wind outside. A feeling of both fear and comfort settled in her chest as she strained her hearing to listen for anything else.

"Did you...say something?"

There was no further response.

The carriage charged forward as the six horses pulling it stamped their hooves against the sand while dragging the heavy vehicle from the waterline and onto dry ground, a snap of the driving whip sounding out above their flank and spurring them forward at full speed. A sole driver sat on the seat perched in front of the carriage proper, their head completely obscured by the large hood and lengthy scarf that didn't seem to impede their sight as the driving whip was raised above their head before cracking down again with a snap, the horses whinnying as their hooves dug into the gravel that paved the way towards a small shoreside town.

"Are you sure you're going to be well enough on your own this year?" A kind voice called out from the other side of the phone call, "You know that Brian and I can swing by and keep you company after our party."

"Don't worry about it, Mikayla," (Y/n) gave a small laugh of amusement, "That's an annual thing you guys do, so I don't want to add stress by demanding you stop by for company. Enjoy your murder mystery dinner."

"It's less of a demand from you and more of a demand from me," Mikayla commented with a smile in her voice, "If you're absolutely certain that you'll be okay tonight with those rambunctious kids wandering the apartment halls, then I'm just gonna advise that you turn off the light in your living room and not watch scary movies. Somehow, kids know when to

start causing mischief when they're overly excited from the Halloween atmosphere."

"The light's already off, so no worries there," She offered a smile to no one as she absentmindedly stroked the lip of her mug, "As for scary movies, you know that I don't get the same enjoyment from them as those with sight."

"Well, I mean...anyone can tell when a sex scene is happening because of the music and the actors' groaning."

"That's different!" (Y/n) laughed as she set down the mug on the table immediately next to her couch seat, "When romance is supposed to be felt, it's pretty obvious what's happening. However, when fear is the emotion that needs to be conveyed...all I can hear is silence with some deep rumbly music before something either happens to scare the characters or audience, or it turns into a fake-out."

"Yeah...I hear you. Most of the cliché jumpscare stuff is really dumb," Mikayla sighed as the background noise began to pick up in the call from her side, "I guess I've been spoiling myself with psychological horror. You know the ones -- gore-free and still somehow rated 'PG-13'."

"Uh-huh," (Y/n) adjusted her posture into a more relaxed pose, "The ones that really dive down into how twisted human nature can be when it's pushed to the edge of survival."

"The non-traditional jumpscares are a bonus."

"Mikayla--"

"I know, I know. I'll leave you to it, (y/n)," She grunted as she stood up, "I've got a party to get to and a fiance to impress with my Halloween costume."

"Have fun."

The call clicked dead before (y/n) lowered the flip phone to her lap, taking in a deep breath as the evening news began playing through her television. With the noise droning on in the background, she numbly rubbed her thumb against the side of her phone, a small frown pulling down the corners of her mouth.

It had only been five years since she became blind, her friends and family doing everything in their power to ensure that she still felt normal despite the significant changes that happened immediately. The event that took her sight lasted only a few seconds, and the recovery lasted a lot longer than she thought possible.

Hell...she was still recovering, technically.

Her free hand rested against the pair of dark sunglasses that wrapped over her eyes, hiding the glass orbs installed in her empty sockets acting as a permanent measure to ensure that the orbits didn't become infected. The sunglasses also hid the scar resulting from the accident, her flesh forever bearing the damage caused by high-tension wire from a machine at her old workplace, the gnarled scar barely shrinking down with time.

Who would've thought that the safety glasses meant to keep her vision safe were the very source of her blindness?

"Stop," She commented to herself, "Mom helped pay off the remaining hospital bills, and Dad found this apartment that's close to them. Help is a simple speed dial away, but dwelling on how I got here isn't going to help my building stress..."

Slipping the sunglasses off, (y/n) shifted her position on the couch and sank more into the soft cushions, wanting nothing more than for Halloween to be over.

The apartment complex had many families living within the buildings, and she would normally be fine with the screaming, excited kids running down the halls...but she'd been feeling off for the past week or so. A heavy feeling crowded the back of her mind, almost like an overbearing weight of ominous dread that seemed to swallow her thoughts.

Fuair mé tú...

The words made her freeze again before (y/n) audibly scanned the room for whoever uttered them.

"Hello?" (Y/n) couldn't hide the shake in her voice, "You should know that I don't have anything of value if your intention is to rob me."

Silence was the response to her question.

Without another word, she stood up from the couch and moved towards the front door of the apartment, her fingers quickly ensuring that all of the locks were in place. Beyond the wooden door sounded the beginning noises of trick-or-treating, several kids screaming out the iconic words as adults responded in various different ways while several pairs of footfalls sounded in the carpeted hall.

Le mo cheann, tá do bhás cinnte.

The voice sounded behind her as the faint sound of street traffic filtered through the closed window, her ears barely registering the odd sound of horseshoes hitting the asphalt.

"Very funny. You've got a neat trick going on, but I'm not scared," (Y/n) moved over towards the glass jar, her fingers splayed wide to try and catch whoever was talking. The voice had come from its direction despite her not hearing any footsteps besides her own, "I'll call the police for trespassing if you don't leave in the next thirty seconds."

Her hands hit the wall as her waist barely pressed into the lip of the table, her focus distracted for a moment by confusion. She reached down and gently took the glass jar into her arms, cradling it carefully as the audible world around slowly died into silence.

The kids that should have been running around with excitement were suddenly quieted, the adults watching over them no longer offering suggestions of how to act.

It was as if she was the only living being alive.

The air grew cold.

(Y/n) stilled as she pressed the jar to her chest, trying to find some inkling of comfort from its touch as she carefully maneuvered towards the kitchen with the intention of finding the large knife drawer. The familiar warmth budded within her chest, slowly pushing back the fear that was settling over her heart as her thumb rubbed against the cold surface.

'When you're scared or fearful, (y/n), keep this close to you,

' Her grandfather's words pulled themselves from an old memory, the sight of him holding out the pale green glass jar to a much younger (y/n) with a smile on his face, '

This contains the remains of a powerful knight who saved those in trouble. He'll come running to your side when you need help.

'

She had never believed the tales attached to the family heirloom, but the eerie silence had suddenly made her wish that she listened to the stories of the great knight that her grandfather spoke of.

Quickly counting the drawers with her right hand, she opened the fifth one and carefully reached into it until her fingers curled around the wooden handle of a sturdy knife, pulling it out and pointing towards her front door. Steadying her breath, (y/n) waited to hear another noise -- something...anything that would tell her that she really wasn't alone in her own locked apartment.

The seconds stretched into minutes as the silence continued, a numb ringing starting to echo in her ears as she strained her senses to their utmost ability.

She flinched when a loud footstep echoed out from beyond her front door, the knife in her hand pointing towards at the sound before the silence splintered along with the wood of the door, the noise at such volume that

she could swear the entirety of the door was ripped from the hinges and torn asunder like paper.

A heavy boot stomped into the apartment as a furious wind whipped around (y/n), the air suddenly thick with the smell of death and decay.

(Y/n) trembled as she pressed the glass jar tighter against her chest, the warmth flooding her entire body as she used the kitchen counter to slide against the wall, the knife aimed towards the intruder.

Two more steps within the apartment, both drawing closer to her.

If she was desperate for anything in this moment, it was her sight.

It was right there.

He could see it despite the human clinging to it like it was something that would save her. The thought was almost enough for him to smile.

Almost.

She was staring past him, the feeble wooden spoon pointed in his direction while the green hues of her eyes never seemed to fluctuate in his presence.

Blind.

That didn't matter to him. Nothing else did except for what was his, which happened to be in her grip. With time running out for the evening, he had limited options of how to get it back.

All of them included killing her.

"You have something of mine," His voice was deep and dark, partially echoing in the warped area he had created to keep others from interfering. A small seed of pleasure bloomed as he watched the human woman flinch once more, his gaze never leaving the pale green glass jar she held, "I want it back."

"I...have nothing for you!" The ferocity in her voice is barely heard underneath the fear.

He took another step towards her, moving around the island counter that separated the kitchen from the sparsely-decorated living room. His armor was heavy, clicking with every step as the thick cloak rustled around his form.

"Give that to me."

The look of realization settled on her features as she tightened her grip on the jar. She knew what it was...she had to.

"This doesn't belong to you!" The insignificant human cornered herself in the kitchen as he stopped on the only exit from the area, "This is for my family alone!"

"

Rud éadóchasach

...if you could see, then you'd understand that you have no other option," His words stilled her as he held out a hand towards the jar, the wind dying down as the hood remained where it sat over his shoulders, "There is no knight that will come to your rescue, and I will walk away with what I have been searching for. Whether you die peacefully or gruesomely is your choice."

"You...know about the stories...?" The wooden tool in her hand faltered as her empty gaze fell down to the jar, her thumb brushing against its smooth surface. He could almost feel her touch through the material on his cheek.

"The lies that your cursed bloodline whisper have nothing on the truth that I've lived through."

The human stilled once more, her mind processing and reprocessing the information.

"If I am to...die, as you say...then tell me why my friend means so much to you."

He grabbed the top of the jar with his gauntlet, metal clinking against glass before he ripped it from her feeble grip. She cried out in shock before dropping the spoon and reaching out to where he was with both hands, her fingers lightly brushing against the blackened chestplate before a single word hung in the air.

"(Y/n)."

The woman's body dropped to the ground, lifeless.

The woman's spirit remained standing where she was as she rapidly blinked, confusion washing over her features before her gaze settled on his form.

He didn't care about her reaction, his sole focus now on the glass jar in his grip. As she screamed in fear, he crushed the jar with a mere flex of his fingers, the ancient ash falling through the cracks of the ruined container down to the floor.

"Get away from that!" She screamed as the glass shattered, her sight somehow restored as the armored figure stood tall with her glass heirloom in their hand. Her eyes widened as they simply clenched their fist, shattering the vessel and causing ash to fall from the wide open cracks, "No, stop!"

The ash coagulated like a thick sludge, swirling in their palm until it formed a dome-like shape and dented inwards until the gray dust fell away. As the ash floated to the ground, she simply stared at the object still in their gauntlet.

No, it wasn't an object.

It was a decapitated human head.

"I should thank you for not getting rid of this," The dark voice boomed from deep within the hood the person wore, drawing her attention before her eyes widened. Where she had expected to see someone's face, there was a sickly green mist that swirled about within the hood with no head in sight, "Give my regards to Eamon when you see him."

"Eamon...?"

"Of course," The voice echoed with a growl as the person lifted the head up towards where their own would've been, the green mist reaching out and somehow streaming into the open neck of the thing. Steadying it with both hands, the person lowered the decapitated head down as the hood fell back to reveal an empty neck, "The patriarch of your bloodline that stole this from me."

The headless man fully lowered the decapitated head onto their shoulders, the green mist flashing brightly for a moment before slowly leaking from the clean line between head and neck, dripping down their armor and cloak like ooze. The head itself leaned back slightly before opening its eyes, drawing a shocked cry from the woman.

"Come. I have found what I was searching for," The definitive male spoke with the same voice, his lips pulling back and revealing a ghastly sneer as the dark hues of his eyes regarded her form, "Your punishment is waiting."

"No way! I'm not leaving my home!" (Y/n) took a step away from him, her eyes narrowed in anger, "You can't just waltz in, take something precious to me, and expect me to just follow your word!"

"

Níl aon rogha ann

," He held up a length of green chain, curling his fingers over the links and making his way out of the apartment, "Your choice was forfeit as soon as you took my head into your custody."

She didn't move from her spot until the chain was stretched to its limit, yanking her along by the neck as she yelled in surprise, "Get this off!"

The man didn't answer as he crossed the threshold of the apartment door, looking towards either end of the hallway and leaving her crying out in protest as he continued to drag her out of the apartment.

"Please, stop!" (Y/n) began begging as tears began forming in the corners of her eyes, "Don't force me from my home! I don't want to go with you, so take this off! You have what you want, so leave me be..."

The armored man walked down the staircase that led to the ground floor, his footsteps echoing in the silence as she continued to whimper pleas. As they passed through the main door to the apartment complex, she went silent at the sight of the horse-drawn black carriage.

Six black horses were tethered to the massive carriage that seemed to be made of blackened bones and black-stained wood, the upper corners lit with black sconces holding green fire. The horses had blazing green eyes that regarded her with hatred, each breath exhaling in a spurt of green flames that matched the ones in the sconces, pawing at the pavement underneath their metallic horseshoes with energetic anxiety.

(Y/n)'s quivering gaze slowly shifted towards the armored man, his gauntlet pulling up the deep hood once more as he regarded the vehicle.

"You're...a Dullahan..."

The green mist seeping from underneath the hood illuminated the narrowed glare he gave her. A chill ran down her spine as the chain wrapped around her neck pulled her towards the carriage on its own, the line having fallen from his grip and slithering into the now wide-open carriage door.

"No, wait! You can't take me! I'm not dead!" She fought against the chain, her sock-covered feet gaining no traction on the pavement as the chain dragged her towards the black carriage.

(Y/n) had heard of the Cóiste Bodhar, or death coach, from the stories that her grandfather had told her. She vaguely remembered that some vengeful ghost was supposedly the driver for said coach, but never bothered to pick up details.

The coach was only meant for those who had died, though.

The Dullahan's glare never wavered as the mist's inner glow shifted around, still pouring from the wound, "If you know of me and my charge, then you're smart enough to know what you are."

His intense stare seemed to grow as she withered under its focus, slowly looking back to the apartment building before shifting her gaze to her hands.

The transparency of her form made her eyes widen, staggering forward as the chain continued to pull her towards the open coach door.

"You didn't say my name! I couldn't have died!"

"Your ability to listen doesn't affect what I can do," The Dullahan turned towards one of the lead horses, gently rubbing his hand through its rough mane and patting the lengthy neck before climbing up to the driver's bench on the coach, "I spoke; your soul listened. Now, we ride back to the mainland for your punishment."

"No, that's not fair!" She gripped the edges of the doorframe tightly, holding herself from being yanked in as the chain grew taut under the strain, her upper body slowly being pulled towards the interior of the coach, "I won't go!"

"

Níl aon rogha ann

, human. There was never any choice for you."

One of the horses screamed with impatience as the others clawed at the pavement, wishing to move from their spot while another let out a chilling

bray. The Dullahan did nothing to calm them as he turned to partially look at the ghost of (y/n) fighting against her fate. She barely glanced up to see him regarding her struggle.

There was no pity in his gaze, the dark color filled with hatred as the green mist lit up his features.

"Just...tell me one thing," Her voice was strained as she held on for as long as she could, deep down knowing that this was a losing war.

Her only answer was the tightening of reins as the Dullahan wrapped the loose ends around his hands, pulling the horses' energy together as if he was about to give them the order to move.

"If that was your head in the jar...did you ever enjoy it when I cared for it?" There was some hope in her voice, as if she was desperate to hear something positive from the wrathful entity that now held her very being captive.

He was silent for a moment, the reins loosening ever so slightly before he tightened his grip even more and snapping them down onto the flanks of the angry creatures bound to the carriage. The instruction was what they were waiting for, the horseshoes digging into the pavement like it was sand and propelling the coach forward with a jolt as (y/n) lost her grip and flew into the carriage, the heavy black door slamming shut behind her.

"Now You're Trapped"

"I can guarantee that they won't be there."

I stifled a whimper as I furiously shook my head, the cellphone still pressed to my ear. A sigh whispered over the line in my silence.

"...I get it. I really do," The masculine voice softened, "I just don't like the thought of you being alone this year."

"I...I don't want to go."

"And that's okay. Would you like for me to stop by?"

Another shake of my head, "I want to be alone, Derik. Please...stop asking."

"Okay, okay," The man on the other end consented with a hefty breath, "I just...I know what they did to you, and I want to help you get some semblance of normalcy back to your social life."

The phone call ended with hushed goodbyes, my hand falling from my face as I gently placed the device on my bedside table, burying myself back into the mess of bedsheets and blankets that had been my comfort zone for the past few months.

"It's that time of year again, monster," Derik's voice sounded through the call, "My brother and I are keeping the party to just close friends since we had too many fights last year...interested in joining us?"

While my curiosity peaked about what had happened during the yearly reunion party, I barely shook my head once more, "No...I'll pass."

"Okay," I could hear him smiling a little, "You know that I still care for you, right?"

"You've made me aware of that since it ended months ago."

"Then that's all I have to say. Just promise me that when you're ready to talk about what happened, please let me know."

My gaze fell from the rain-distorted window pane, slowly looking around the darkened bedroom that hid a disastrous mess. There was a comforting presence deep within the darkness despite the seething anger that swirled within it, "...when I'm ready."

"Happy Halloween, monster," Derik's voice called through the voicemail, "I was hoping to catch you around this time, but alas! 'tis all for nought. Party will be starting soon -- got a handful of people coming -- so I'll be a little busy tonight. If you wanna chat, just send me a text."

"No, I'm not going," I responded to no one's question, looking towards the darkest corner of my untidied room as I deleted the voicemail, "They might be there."

My brow furrowed as a retort echoed in my head.

"My friends are better off without some loser like me. They've moved on; I've moved on."

My gaze softened as I took another look around the room, some of the mess pushed aside to make space for occultic drawings and runes, a few lit black candles barely casting any shadows, "...maybe next year."

"You made it!" A man my age shouted out over the loud music, his wild unkempt hair more noticeable with the dyed pink color from a lost bet. He pushed his way through the gathering crowd near the extravagant backyard pool and wrapped his free arm around my shoulders, his other hand clutching a large plastic cup partially filled with shrunken ice and some orange liquid. His breath reeked of alcohol, "Grab a drink, get loose!"

"You know I don't drink, Derik," I tried to shove his arm off, hefting the quarterback's arm from my body before he could settle his weight against me like a crutch, "Headaches and all."

"Bullshit..." His words were less slurred now that his tone was more quiet, "You always drank with me when we were dating."

"I wonder why I stopped drinking, then."

"Oooh, sassy girl," With a deep pull from his cup, Derik stood back up and instantly shrugged off the drunken act with a wide, friendly smile, "I gotta make sure everyone has fun here. My party and all."

"Just watch the cups, okay? I don't want another incident like a few years ago..."

"Hey," Derik's voice dipped low, leaning close to ensure only I could hear, "The cups here are specially ordered. Throw the drink out if the white turns baby blue."

My eyes fell to his drink, seeing the white plastic on the inside, "...you're sure?"

"Promise," He held out his free pinky, leaning away from me with the same smile, "You're like my little sister, and I aim to be a good big brother."

I laughed, hooking my pinky around his and shaking it firmly, "People are going to start questioning our relationship if they hear you say that."

"Fuck 'em," He shrugged, releasing my pinky and pointing towards the equally-extravagent house, "Those cups are on the inside, as are the drinks. All under surveillance. I'm out here to make sure that no outside cups are brought in."

"Then, is Marik...?"

"He's covering inside. Go say hi," Derik waved farewell as he slipped back into the crowd, adopting his drunken façade once more to blend in with the crowd.

The crowd seemed to grow as I slowly made my way past various groups of people, apologizing if I bumped into them and asking to squeeze through the tight walkways. No matter where I stepped, the music always seemed to

pulse in the air and under the ground, the bass nearly dictating how my heart should beat before I walked through the back door of the house and was hit with a different track. There were fewer people inside than out and I took advantage of the emptier space, closing the distance between myself and the kitchen where the wet bar was.

"Well, well. Look who's here," A chipper voice called out behind me, drawing my attention to the twin, "Last I knew, you weren't going to attend because of the noise."

"Hey, Marik," I slid onto a barstool in the drink area, taking a deep breath and releasing it slowly, "...I didn't really want to be alone tonight."

"You're welcome to stay for as long as you're comfortable," Marik offered a sympathetic smile, clearing away some empty soda cans and replenishing the special plastic cups, "You know where the quiet spots are here, so I won't stop you from using those."

I gave an understanding nod, leaning against the bar and folding my arms to rest my head on. Marik's practiced movements betrayed his experience as a bartender, the rhythm that he kept almost mesmerizing as he poured out drinks for those who were still thirsty and denied others when they had too much.

"--ut when I told them what it would cost, they turned down my offer."

I stilled, my skin prickling up in fear at the sound of

that

voice as I buried my head deeper into my arms.

"Sounds like your business is having a hard time," Derik's voice sounded close, presumably walking in with

them

, "Too bad that it's really rough in this economy for startups like you."

"Eeh, it's a tough life," The lilting tone dug into my spine like a nail scratching against a blackboard, "Programming is a tough gig to have, but it's the only thing that allows me to have the freedom that I really want."

My ears tracked the two up to the bar while my eyes were bursting with stars of color from the pressure of my forearms against them.

"Well, glad to hear that you haven't drowned in the sea of computer geeks wanting to stake a claim in this day and age," Derik's voice rumbled against my left side, clearly indicating that he had taken up a physical wall between me and the person he was talking to.

No...not person.

Devil

.

Starla Kindrie, the person that caused the incident three years ago at the last Halloween reunion bash. They

had

been a 'she' at the time, flip-flopping between the two binary pronouns before settling on a gender neutral identity.

...but they were always someone that rode a social high, even back in high school. Always declaring themselves to be trendsetters no matter the cost to anyone around them. I wasn't even sure that they were doing this binary switching because they were confused about which they were.

I tilted my head away from the pair,

Not my business.

"Derik, could you get me a drink that'll

really

send my head spinning?"

"I'm a little offended, Starla," Marik laughed, the sound of ice shaking like a reminder that he was the one tending the bar, "Do you not trust my drinks?"

They scoffed openly, "Not after what happened to my

bestie

."

The word sounded pointed.

Fuck.

"Drink too much, Moonie?" I felt their hand on my shoulder, tightly gripping my shirt before pulling me up into a sitting position and turning me in the same motion.

The blue eyes hidden under the red contacts that oozed animosity, the pale makeup that barely covered the sword-like birthmark on their neck, the blood-red lipstick that absolutely coated their lips that had been artificially plumped up.

"Fuck you, Starla," I twisted in the barstool, tearing my shirt away from their claws, "I was enjoying my five seconds of peace."

"Aww, is alcohol still too much for baby Moonie?" They pulled their hand back, curling it innocently under their chin before running their fingers through the overly-gelled hair. They had dressed as a devil, one of those overly-sexualized ones where nothing was left to the imagination.

"Stop calling me that. It's not my name."

"But we were the star and moon that people wished they could be," They lightly bit down on their pinky nail, the tone indicating something more.

"Here's your drink, Starla," Derik interjected, pushing a cup full of alcohol between Starla and myself, "I couldn't remember the exact formula, so

you'll have to forgive the taste."

They didn't turn their eyes from me, nor did I flinch from the unspoken challenge, "We could've been something, you know."

"If only you didn't spike my drink..." I sneered back.

"Oh, please," They swallowed half of the offered mixture, slamming the cup down in front of me, "Finish this. Show me there's no bad blood between us, bestie."

My right hand nearly crushed the cup as I launched the remnants at their face, only dropping the cup when Starla cried out in shock.

"None of that!" Marik shouted while Derik grabbed some paper towels, offering me a few before pushing the rest towards Starla.

"Both of you need to cool it. Starla, go back outside and I'll fix you another drink. You," Derik's voice softened a little, "Head up to the room. One of us will be there shortly..."

My left hand clutched my right, my arm trembling as I stared at the appendage, "...yeah..."

I sat in the darkened lobby -- a room that was supposed to act as a waiting area between the main foyer and the twins' father's office -- staring at my right hand in shock. I've always had the thought of throwing a drink at Starla's smug face, but never had the courage to do it.

My control was getting worse.

I thought I had told them to not show themselves...

I bit my bottom lip in worry as my right hand tightened into a fist, the pressure radiating out in pain as my untrimmed nails dug into the flesh of my palm.

"Mind telling me what happened there?" Derik's voice was quiet after the lobby door closed shut behind him, "That wasn't you."

"I...don't really know. My hand acted on its own," I couldn't stop my voice from trembling as I looked up at the man, his jacket slipping off his shoulders to acclimate to the warmer room.

"Props to you for doing it, but you...didn't look like yourself when it happened."

"What do you mean?" My stomach began to sink into my gut.

"Well...you looked like you had waited for them to put something in front of you, just...gleefully chucking the drink at them. I'd never seen you grin like that before."

"...then I need to go home," I quickly stood up, shaking out my right hand from the fist nervously, "I'm sorry I couldn't stay here any longer."

"It's no biggie," Derik stood up with me, draping his jacket over his arm, "Need one of us to walk you off property?"

I shook my head cautiously, "Thanks, but I'll pass. I took a shortcut here and I don't want to get in the way of your host duties."

"Hey," His hand briefly rested on my shoulder long enough to catch my attention before his hand fell, "Making sure our guests are safe is the duty of a host. Let me walk you to the fence, at least."

"...to the fence," I nodded at the compromise.

Derik walked at my pace as he escorted me from the lobby back into the thrumming crowd near the pool. Some people had already taken it upon themselves to jump in, challenging others to do the same while the music kept the flow of merriment going.

I kept my eyes down until I saw his shoes stop in front of me, a wooden plank door swinging wide open -- the same one I had come through -- and casting out the light from the party into the darkness.

Derik uttered my name cautiously, "If you'd rather stay, you know that Marik and I don't mind...I don't feel comfortable letting you leave like this."

"Hey, maybe next Halloween," I lifted my face towards his, trying to offer an apologetic smile, "I'll come early so we can have some quiet time before the ruckus starts."

"Sounds like a plan," Derik held out his hand towards me, palm out. I reciprocated the high-five with a more certain smile, "Happy Halloween, monster."

I cleared the door with a laugh, "Happy Halloween, jock."

As the backyard door swung shut, I took in a deep breath while the dark of evening began to succumb to night.

"...shut up..." I mumbled as I began my trek back through the neighboring forest, two voices quietly whispering in my head.

My phone's flashlight was more than enough to light up the area around me as I weaved through the trees and bushes, mindful of the fallen branches that I had made note of earlier. Soon, I heard an odd echo to my footsteps.

Pausing momentarily, I heard something crack behind me to the left, barely turning that direction to see a shadowy figure rush towards me. The phone's light swept over the area to reveal a person wearing a completely blank mask, my throat unleashing a scream as I stumbled over my footing before regaining my steps and sprinting through the forest.

A brilliant flash dazzled my eyes when I turned around a thicker tree trunk, staggering back and falling over a dead branch before a shrill laughter tore through the night air.

"Oh-em-gee, Moonie! That's soo fucking hilarious!"

I shook my head as the camera flash blinded my eyes, furiously wishing that my lens would normalize faster.

"Aww, look at this freeze frame!" Starla's chiding voice sounded close, "Just like the kid I knew you were."

"Should get some ad revenue, right?" An unknown male voice called out, sounding partially muffled.

"Oh, yeah. People eat this shit up around Halloween," Starla teased, "Just label it as 'Halloween-pranking a friend' and no one will be the wiser."

"...why did you follow me--?!" I barely got to ask before something cold was pressed over my lips, liquid sloshing down my throat as I suddenly struggled to breathe. Throwing my hands up in front of my face, I felt my left hand hit plastic before it was tossed away from my mouth.

"Here, start recording. She drank enough of it."

...what?

"And when did you want me to step in?" The man let out a satisfied huff, as if he had been waiting for this moment the entire day.

"When she runs again. I'm sending this one to the 'Hub, so don't mention the 'Vitamin K'," They commanded, the crunching of leaves in front of me sending chills up my spine.

"No, don't...! Don't rape me again....!" Using my mental map of where the voices were, I moved away from both of them, "...what did I ever do to you, Starla!?"

My eyesight began to clear from the powerful camera flash, catching the red plastic cup discarded at my feet with some blue liquid pouring out onto the forest floor.

No...it wasn't the drink that was blue.

It was the inside of the cup.

I started dry heaving as I scrambled to my feet, tears threatening to smother my vision as distant fears rushed through my veins.

"What are you waiting for?!" I could hear Starla yell at the guy, willing myself to shove aside the beginning effects of whatever drug they had used.

My feet carried me just far enough to break through the rough forest line and into a semi-familiar clearing, fear keeping them running until one of my knees locked up and I fell forward onto a hard surface. Two voices kept shouting behind me, but I could only think of escape; escape from the torment, escape from my ex-friend...escape from the monsters chasing me down.

I lifted my hands towards a silvered lever knob, pulling down with assistance from gravity and crawling inside to hide in the safety of darkness. My thoughts became more jumbled, my stomach turning at the bitter taste of the drink, my legs failing to find forward momentum, my hands barely grasping at something long that had fallen over my body.

I felt...warm.

A scream pierced the numbness swallowing my mind, my thoughts foggy as they were finally stirred from the unconscious state they had fallen into.

Another scream -- more masculine, this time -- sounded and I flinched against the heavy weight on top of me, ripping the itchy material off of my body and throwing it as far as I could from my relaxed position.

"...I don't..." I barely uttered in the silence of wherever I was, clambering up into a sitting position and pushing away from whatever it was on top of me, begging for it to only be a coat or something similar.

Pulling my legs close to my chest, I held my breath for a moment as my mind scrambled to remember what had happened.

A deep sniff interrupted my thoughts, the same sound echoing out from beyond where I was. It sounded predatory, like a beast looking for its target. Another quick inhale from the unknown sent my nerves ablaze, the wall I had thought solid next to me nudging open as the hinges squeaked a little.

There was a long moment of silence as I held my breath, just waiting for something to pounce or drag me out of the closet.

"...now you're trapped..."

The closet door ripped open and I only saw a man's pale face rushing me before my vision was surrounded by black.

"...don't touch me...!" I felt his cold fingers wrap over my eyes, his palm pressing down on my face fiercely.

"You found quite the hiding spot, Moonie," I could hear Starla from behind the man, "I never thought we'd find you in this wonderful house."

I scrambled to peel the man's hand off my face, "No...! Don't touch me!"

"Sounds like the stuff wore off too quickly," He huffed, trying to drag me out of the awkward position.

"Damn...we didn't get to her in time. Oh well," They sounded flippant, "I've got more."

"...no, don't..." I pleaded, trying to shake my head free before the man's other hand grabbed my hair, finding some purchase with his feet and yanking me out of the closet, out of the darkness and into the bright beam of a flashlight. The voices buzzing in my head grew louder, "Don't do it here! Not in front of them..."

"Were you going to suggest some place else, Moonie?" Starla's footsteps marked their position as they walked closer towards me, "Oh, do tell."

Both hot and cold wrapped around my body, each one gathering on either shoulder before it became too much. The man's hand flinched away from my face as I leaned forward, my hands on the floor as I struggled to breathe.

The two voices grew louder, one laughing maniacally while the other offered to give me comfort. I knew what they wanted, and it would only make it worse if I kept their leash short.

"Fine...just these two..."

I blacked out.

Starla could only stare as two figures seemed to emerge from 'Moonie's' shoulders, one of them holding the hired man aloft by his throat.

The one holding the man up wore a white shirt with a loose collar, whose long sleeves billowed out before being cinched tight over or around their hands. A black belt clung to their waist, pinning the shirt on top of black skin-tight shorts that left the knees and lower thighs exposed while their shins and calves were encompassed by leather straps that crossed over each other in diamond-like patterns before fastening down into a pair of flat sandals.

The glowing yellow halo and small pair of white feathered wings were barely registered in Starla's mind, their eyes darting over to the other figure staring with gleeful wide eyes back at them.

The happy smirk widened on the figure's lips, their eyes mimicking the movement as Starla registered its presence. A dark long jacket covered the figure's chest and arms, the hems tattered by misuse and mistreatment of the garment while the bottom hem was purposefully sheared into multiple tails. A dark purple vest stretched across their chest, the neckline showing off a neatly pressed white shirt and purple tie underneath before the vest gave way to a slim pair of black pants, completely covering the figure's legs. A pair of dark purple boots comfortably sat on their feet.

The purple horns and four black leathered wings on the figure's back didn't catch Starla's eye, either.

"Ahahaa...I thought she was hallucinating this scenario," The dark figure laughed, leaning forward a little before taking a step in front of the cowering woman, "I guess not."

"You're the one that wanted to interfere..." The light figure hummed in thought, tossing aside the man like he weighed nothing before looking back towards Starla, "That one is the sinner."

"Ohh, I know," The tone the dark figure spoke with sounded more like a starving man waiting for the 'all clear' to eat a full-course meal, "You'll get the remains."

"Half and half, as we agreed."

The dark figure growled, his cheer suddenly gone in an instant, "...fine."

"...what...are you?" Starla stumbled back, their eyes quickly searching for the hired man to only find his torso buried in a wall while his waist and legs were strewn along the floor, blood marking the trail the torso followed between the wall and the white figure, "What the fuck!?"

"I am the one protecting her," The white figure's lips stretched into a wide, innocent smile, gesturing down to 'Moonie'.

"I am the one punishing you," The dark figure licked its lips in anticipation, some saliva dripping down his chin despite the act.

A wordless scream left Starla's mouth as she ran from the front lobby, tearing open the front door to the abandoned mansion and scrambling to clear the front porch. A cold hand gripped their right leg tightly, five claws digging into their skin as they hit the wooden planks hard.

"You're the one that started this mess..." The dark figure merely held out one of their hands, a darker shadow pulling Starla back towards it as a playful sneer rested on its lips. Starla barely glanced over their shoulder, their nails trying desperately to dig into the stained planks of wood as she kept crying out in fear.

"...now you're trapped," The white figure mocked, its mouth open in a gleeful smile.

Starla screeched in pain as they were dragged back into the house, the front door slamming shut with finality.

"I'm Tired of Watching"

Western Indian tribes believed in supernatural beings known as Skinwalkers. The Navajo tribe especially believed that these Skinwalkers were shape-shifters who could assume the form of any animal which allowed them to travel quickly and gave them the ability to hide in plain sight. Specifically, a person is said to gain the power to become a Skinwalker upon initiation into the Witchery Way. The initiation into the Witchery Way involved murdering a close relative, especially a sibling; other crimes also associated with it were necrophilia, and grave-robbing. Once one has been initiated into the Witchery Way they become "pure evil." It is interesting to note that in the Native culture most witches were male not female.

- Denver Public Library, "Skinwalkers, Wendigos, and the Witchery Way".

The wind gently blew against his hair, matted and unkempt, as he took a deep breath in through his nose to fill his lungs up completely. With a satisfied huff, he released the air through his teeth like a faint hiss in the silence comfortably wrapped around him.

Decaying leaves were helplessly pushed around by the same wind playing with his hair, lifting the fringe high enough to reveal the man's eyes gazing down at the ground in front of him.

Five bodies lay around him, humanoid in form and naked in dress.

It would be a peaceful scene but for the blood pouring from their necks and chests, the man's eyes switching between the five corpses as he took in another breath. But the feeling swelling within his belly wasn't sorrow or fear.

He was

joyful

.

His kin -- his five brothers -- had given him a golden ticket to a new life, paid with their deaths. As his lips spread into a smile, he lifted one of his hands to his face and ignored the blood completely coating his hand and forearm while pushing his fringe from his eyes, slicking back the hair and affixing it in place.

The Witchery Way was open to him and he'd gladly indulge himself with its promises.

He lost count of how many times the sun soared across the sky. Thousands? Millions?

Society around him thrived. Buildings previously made of wood and stone were now built in steel and glass. Fashion turned too quickly for him to keep up. What used to be pen and ink was now digital and invisible.

The man had tried to fit in, to walk among mortal humans...but the regimented lives they desired quickly grew boring to him, filling instead his hunger of lust and blood. He felt

alive

when his animalistic teeth tore skin and muscle from bone.

There was a time that he had thought watching humans would be enough, to wear his animal skin alongside them and ease his boredom for only a moment. He was

tired

of watching, yet someone caught his eye, her heart pulsing within her chest as the blood flowing through her veins sang to him, begging him to devour her.

And so he donned his skin once more.

I gasped for breath as I pushed myself to my limit, pushing out the last quarter mile while the music thrummed in my earbuds and encouraging me to keep going. Sweat poured down my brow as my legs slowed to a walk, the muscles feeling like lead while I popped open my small water bottle and downed the rest of the water.

"Ah...fuck, that was hard..."

"What does that make it?" Another voice called out behind me, drawing my focus for a moment before a sarcastic laugh parted my lips, "I thought you

wanted

to run a marathon by year-end?"

"Ha ha, Will," I tucked the bottle back into my pouch as the man slowed to a walk next to me, drinking from his own bottle while wiping off his face with a small towel, "I'm sure this isn't a workout for you, Mr. Iron Man."

"Marathon training is different from a triathlon," He hummed after swallowing, "This isn't easy for someone trying something out for the first time."

"Why can't it be?"

"Then it wouldn't be called a 'challenge'."

I had meant to retort back when I heard a distinct yelp from the nearby park, a high-pitched whine that sounded pathetic and helpless.

A dog's whine.

"Oh, no...!" Will made it known he heard it, too, "C'mon, let's check it out."

Something inside of me begged my legs to not move, growing more quiet as Will and I jogged further up the running path, entering a large grassy field from a break in the trees planted along the pathway.

The whining came from a dog laying next to the barrier trees, its breathing quite rapid while it seemed to favor its front left paw, licking at it with such aggression that I thought something had bit it.

"Hey, buddy, you're gonna be okay," Will slowly approached it, the black and white fur nearly pristine as its brilliant blue eyes locked onto us. It had stopped licking for a moment before its upper lip pulled upwards to reveal its teeth, "It's okay...here, want something to eat?"

Ever the ready vet, Will pulled out a few dog chews from his pouch and gently tossed them near the dog. Its ears perked up before it struggled to its feet, limping over to the treats before giving them an investigative sniff.

"Here, keep giving them while I see if I can check the poor guy out," Will handed the bag to me, my own knowledge as an obedience trainer kicking in as I softly approached the wounded dog.

"There you go," I gently called, tossing a few more treats closer to me that the dog followed, completely ignoring Will who had moved to its left side. The dog seemed to be some kind of husky mix, its blue eyes catching my attention for a moment before it prodded my hand for more treats, "Sorry, guy...here."

Rationing out what Will had handed me, I intentionally kept the dog from eating what I had in my hand by keeping my fist closed until I had thought major milestones of the check up were met. The husky mix patiently waited for a treat to present itself, still ignoring the fingers touching its tender front paw.

"I'm not seeing anything here," Will sighed after a short moment, "No collar, either."

"Should we check to see if anyone's missing a husky?" The dog licked at my hand until I relaxed my fingers, eating the remaining chews before licking my palm clean, "I've got room in my house to keep him so he's not shuffled around in the adoption center."

"Sounds good."

When we made it back to our cars, the dog followed at my heels with very little commands or bribery, confusing me even more at his behavior. Still, I'd do everything I could to make sure he got back to the family that was surely missing him.

Will had stated that he'd look more into it at his clinic, asking the other nurses and vets to see if they'd heard anything.

I had started calling the dog 'Kara'.

Three weeks had come and gone with no news in regards to Kara's original family.

I frowned as I scrolled through various web pages showing missing pets, only seeing a few that were huskies. None matched his description.

The husky whined a little as he rested his head on my feet propped up on the couch, drawing my attention from my laptop as his tail began to wag when I looked at him.

"Sorry, Kara...nothing yet. Maybe a walk will help?"

The word immediately perked the dog's spirits, happily yapping and bounding towards the front door while I laughed and put the laptop aside to gather the walking tools I used. Hooking him to my waist leash, I led him through the front door and began our jog. Kara kept stride with me, often outlasting me with his boundless stamina as I grew winded from the hour-long routine. If he was still energetic, I would bring him to the dog park and let him loose.

He would never play with the other dogs, though.

I heard a knock on my front door a few days later, opening it to see Will in his jogging attire, "Ready?"

"Oh!" I had been relaxing with a book on the couch, losing myself in my imagination while I waited for Will to stop by, "Yeah, just a few minutes."

Clipping the leash belt on and grabbing my keys, I approached Kara as he stared at Will.

"Has he...been aggressive with you at all?"

"I haven't seen Kara be aggressive with anyone," I looked up to see a nervous expression fall from Will's face, "Why?"

"It's probably nothing."

Kara pulled me out the door as we talked, my fingers locking up before stepping onto the sidewalk pavement. Will jogged at my side while we started our usual route, Kara keeping pace between us.

When we had begun the route back to my house, I could tell something was off with Will. I had tried asking him about it, but he kept denying that something was wrong. Kara must've also realized something was going on since he kept pressing his side into my leg like he was corralling me away from Will.

It was only when I stepped on my porch that Will made it clear what was going on in his mind.

My fingers were wrapped around my house key when I heard Will clear his throat, drawing my attention for a split second before a hand lay heavy on my shoulder.

"Listen...I've been trying to be nice about this," The tone that Will spoke in made my skin crawl, "Is there any chance that we could...be a couple?"

"Will!" I gasped as I turned around, shoving his hand from my shoulder while I took a step back, "Dude, no. We were a thing in high school, but you dumped me for my sister."

"You still remember that?" He looked surprised.

"How could I

forget

it!" I slammed the key into the lock, ushered Kara in while he remained quiet during the exchange, "Don't bother stopping by tomorrow."

Closing the door with as much force as I could muster, I sucked in a wavering breath before letting the anger cool into sorrow, desperate to not remember how I had loved Will at one point before I found him in bed with my sister.

It had taken me years to forgive her after she revealed that he lied about being in a relationship with me, but Will never voiced such regret.

I pulled off my running gear, showered off the sweat and tears, and crawled into bed with every intent to sleep off the grief. Kara whined a little as he lay next to me, his wet nose poking at my cheek while resting his front paws on my chest.

"Sorry, Kara...I'm going to bed early..."

He kept watch over her until she had truly fallen asleep, her heartbeat slow yet steady under his hands. He was tempted to indulge his hunger now, but he wanted to build up the feast first.

His bare feet were light on the ground as he stood up, the dog head hood falling from his dark hair as his eyes looked down at the human.

His stomach rumbled.

No, not yet. The other one first.

Tracking the male was easy, his scent trail child's play to find. It led him to a home that looked similar to hers, yet it was completely different. He growled as his lithe limbs climbed the wooden fence to enter the backyard, flinching as a floodlight turned on.

However, no noise was made inside that indicated the human had seen the action.

Up.

He turned his attention towards the second floor, seeing a few windows open to let in the cool fall winds. The fur cloak along his back hugged his form while the hood jumped in place as he climbed the bricks, his fingers easily finding purchase and vaulting up onto the lower roof with ease.

The first window revealed a bedroom, kept tidy and pristine.

The second window showed a bathroom similar to hers, the water pouring from the showerhead to indicate where the man was.

The third window was an office, shelves upon shelves marked and decorated with various models and guides to animal biology.

He kept track of the human as he showered, showing his nude body and drying off only partially while mumbling something to himself. Only when the male moved from the bathroom to the empty bedroom had he dared enter the home, using his sharp fingernail to carve an opening through the metal screen.

The bathroom was flooded with the scent of artificial fruits and chemicals, nearly causing him to gag as he quietly crawled through into the hallway.

The floors didn't creak.

His laugh choked itself within his throat as he pulled the hood over his head, his form breaking and falling to the ground silently. His second skin.

The human was completely surprised to see the dog standing proudly in the doorway, cutting off his escape, "Kara! What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Hungry."

The word sent the male's blood from his face, fear now smothering the room before the husky launched himself into Will's throat. Fang pierced skin, sinew, muscle, bone. Blood poured from the open wound while the dog frantically ate the human's throat, shaking the male occasionally and splattering the lifeblood across the walls, ceiling, bed, and floor.

The human's death was quick.

The meal lasted an hour.

He was still

hungry

. His stomach was sated...but he was still

hungry

.

He didn't bother wiping off what remained of his meal, plodding over to where he lived for the moment.

It was nearing midnight when he approached the porch, jumping over the fence and squeezing through the dog door she had installed for him. He wasn't sure how to spring the surprise for her. She was fond of his fur.

The hood remained up.

His nails clattered on the wooden floorboards, an unassuming sound masking the need driving the motion.

He jumped on the bed, taking a position over the female as his lips pulled back into a snarl while she began to stir.

"Kara...?" Her voice was melodic and heavy with sleep, "What is it, boy?"

Her hand reached out to the light next to her bed, flicking it on and staring in growing horror at the blood still dripping from his muzzle.

"Kara! Are you hurt?!" She started to sit up, his front paws slamming down on her shoulders and pushing her back onto the bed.

"I will give you three questions to ask. You've relieved my boredom for that long," His voice was hoarse, but the threat was real. He hadn't given anyone

else a chance like this before. He was partially intrigued to hear what she would ask.

"Is that...your blood?" The first question was logical, her eyes wide as her heart quickened within its fleshy cage.

"No."

Oh, the look on her face was delectable.

"Will you kill me?"

"Yes."

Another pause as fear continued to seep through her skin.

"Why are you doing this?"

"I'm tired of watching."

His teeth sank into her throat as she opened her mouth, whether to scream or ask something else he didn't care. Her blood spilled forth, filling his mouth while he drank it in. She tried to lift her hands up to his head, one of her fingers catching on his ears. As she took her last breath, her hands fell back to her sides and yanked the hood to the side, forcing him from his second skin as he ripped the chunk of flesh from her throat. The warm liquid cascaded down his bare chest, meeting resistance at the furs wrapped around his waist.

The female didn't move as he ripped the bedsheets off her still form, her skin beginning to cool as his fingers brushed across her skin to tear off the fabric clinging to her waist.

He moved aside the furs to reveal his length, hardened and ready.

She couldn't say no.

His legs swiftly opened her own, shoving himself deep into her unprepared opening as he began feeding from her body again.

There was no sense of urgency from him, taking his time in ravaging her form. His length drove into her over and over with no rhythm, his body only acting on base desires.

She was warm.

He spilled his seed again and again.

The perverted ritual was only disrupted when the female's mobile device sounded a notification, drawing his attention while he continued to rape her.

<Sorry for getting back to you now. Busy day at the office. Did you want to talk about Will?>

He grinned as his fingers typed out a message using her grammar preferences.

<Can't talk now, but could I crash at your place for a little bit? I'm worried that he's going to do something.>

When his sexual hunger had been satisfied, he pulled himself from her, not bothering to clean up any of the mess on her as his seed began to overflow from her womb. Another message snagged his attention while he licked himself clean, a laugh jumping from his throat as an address revealed itself on the phone's screen.

With a simple flick of his wrists, the phone snapped in half. His fingernail pulled the device's information card from the protective shell and crushed it into pieces.

He pulled the hood over his head, donning his second skin easily as he began to walk in the direction of the provided address the female's friend had so readily given.

He was getting hungry again.

"You Are My Favorite"

"I didn't take too much, did I?" His young voice shook with uncertainty, his blood-red hues carefully watching the young human sitting next to him as she pressed a hand against her neck. She only offered a hum while shaking her head, offering a smile in return.

"I'm sure you didn't, Todomatsu," With some hesitancy, she pulled her hand away from the fresh wound to reveal two puncture holes that were red, angry, and inflamed, "I haven't keeled over unconscious yet."

"'Yet' is a pretty important term," He tried to laugh as his eyes watched the sluggish trickle of blood drip down from the lowest mark.

"Go ahead and clean me up. I can see your expression," She tilted her head away from Todomatsu, allowing him to lean closer and tenderly press his tongue against her skin.

He reveled in the shudder she gave as he licked at the marks, ensuring that they had healed correctly before swiping his tongue over his upper lip. It was a feeling that he loved to experience since the human was promised to him when she was a young child.

Both of their families had honored a promise made long ago between their ancestors, for one to act as a living blood bank for the other when needed. Todomatsu's brothers had her cousins while he had her.

She was the one human that made him feel normal in a world that despised his kind.

"Everything good?" Her eyes captured his attention, making him swallow thickly before he could savor the taste of her blood.

"Yeah," Todomatsu nodded sheepishly while glancing away.

This particular feeding was difficult for him. Not for the act, but because of the effects.

Todomatsu was acutely aware of her feelings for him, had always been aware since she first offered her blood to him years ago. He could feel the rush of pleasure she felt when he drank from her neck, her understanding when he fed from her wrist, her embarrassment when he partook from her foot (it was experimental, both of them trying to figure out where he could feed that wouldn't leave obvious marks. They both agreed to never allow that part when it took several hours for his bite to heal), and fully understood her feelings for him.

She

desired

him like a wife desires a husband.

Todomatsu couldn't allow their partnership to grow to that extent.

He was a vampire. She was his living blood bank.

Romantic feelings had nothing to do with it.

...right?

I laughed at a dumb joke Karamatsu told, sitting with the vampiric sextuplets at their common room table while our mothers chatted away in the kitchen and distracted by making dinner for both families. A warm hand slid over mine, my attention snared by the purple clad brother as he flinched away from the accidental contact.

"Careful, Ichimatsu," I teased with a coy smirk, "You know how Todomatsu gets."

"He wouldn't be able to feed from you anyway," The mentioned vampire scoffed, his eyes glued to the phone in his hands, "Mr. Darkness doesn't like your blood type."

"Maybe you should keep her from the table until we've all fed," Choromatsu hummed, taking a long sip of tea before setting the cup down. I clicked my tongue in annoyance while Todomatsu snapping his gaze to the green-clad brother across the table.

"At least I have enough self-control around her," The youngest brother spoke through gritted fangs, my skin chilling at the declaration.

"Enough," Osomatsu droned while waving a hand in front of him, "Act right or we'll never have a chance to sit at the same table."

"Sorry..." I barely heard Ichimatsu's whispered apology above the round of agreements, looking over and giving a smile to show that I heard him. He looked away while tucking his hands into his front hoodie pocket.

"Speaking of choices," Osomatsu carried the conversation, "Didn't something happen with your cousin?"

I realized the question was directed to me, quickly remembering the small accident he was involved in, "Yeah, he'll be hospitalized for a little bit longer to ensure that his body is recovered enough from the fall."

"It's what he gets for being a stuntman," Ichimatsu clicked his tongue, annoyed that my cousin wouldn't be able to walk for a few more days, "I'd visit him, but I don't think I'm allowed in hospitals."

"What about his twin?" Choromatsu offered, "Identicals usually share the same traits."

"I can ask!" Jyushimatsu piped up.

Todomatsu drew my attention by scooting closer until our hips were touching, leaning over and revealing his phone screen. On it was an article describing one of my favorite bands touring close to where we lived, my eyes widening in surprise and excitement.

"Is that a 'yes'?"

"Of course," I chided, bumping his shoulder, "I should tell Fumiko and Yurie about this."

Todomatsu grew quiet as I pulled out my own phone, quickly typing out a message to my girl friends about possibly coming with me to the concert.

"Are they in your class?"

"Yeah, they've been really nice to me since we started high school earlier this year," I slid the phone into my pocket and looked back at Todomatsu, seeing him smile, "I haven't told them about you, but you're welcome to meet them."

He could feel Osomatsu's eyes burning into his skull as she happily made plans with

others

, silently pushing aside his distaste and anger, allowing her to have a life outside of himself. Todomatsu quietly gave an 'all clear' sign to the eldest brother, burying his attention back to his phone.

The conversation picked up around him, the words lost as Todomatsu barely responded to anything while he watched her make plans with her friends. His instincts told him that he needed to back out of the concert, both wanting her to have fun with other humans and not desiring to force himself into her social life.

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Three Years Later

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Todomatsu kept his composure as the young woman named Yurie cried out, his fangs deep within her neck as he poured out his frustrations into her frail body. The vampiric saliva acted as a conduit between the two, carrying his intentions straight to her head and flooding it with his needs. He only smiled as the human began to moan suggestively, her fingers pulling

buttons free from his shirt while she pushed up against him. His fangs slid free of her neck when she maneuvered in the cramped closet space to kneel in front of him, tugging his belt loose and breathing out an excited whimper as she freed his member from its cloth prison.

He didn't care about what the human did, fully embracing everything that she was doing to him while alleviating the headache he had been feeling for months.

Yurie used her mouth to play with Todomatsu, her eyes lidded with arousal while blood trickled down her neck to stain her school shirt. His hands remained in his pants pockets, viciously judging the human pleasuring herself orally with his length.

This wasn't the first time he had done this to her, nor would it be the last. Her blood tasted disgusting, but Todomatsu refused to do this to

her

. It's a line he wasn't sure if she really wanted to cross.

Fumiko was the first victim to his saliva, her blood type making him nauseous and leaving him unable to move for a few hours while she had her way with him. Todomatsu tried other friends

she

had made throughout high school, finding that Yurie had the closest blood match.

He still got sick, but not to the point where he was immobilized.

Now, Todomatsu watched quietly as Yurie pulled his hardened length from her mouth and pressed herself against it. His eyes hooded at the action, "Stand up,

my dear

."

Yurie obeyed immediately, looking up at him expectantly.

"Turn around and lean against the wall."

Todomatsu forced himself into the human from behind, expertly shifting her panties to the side and licking his upper lip while imagining

his human

underneath him instead. The cries Yurie gave began to sound like hers, his hands pulling from his pockets and reaching down to grip her breasts tightly.

The size was larger but that didn't matter to his mind's eye.

His fingers pulled at her shirt, opening several buttons and dipping into the cups holding the supple mounds of flesh, his touch sensitive to her heartbeat while he teased the nipples.

"Silence,

my dear

..." His command was followed, her muffled moans rolling in her throat. Todomatsu didn't care if someone opened the door to expose what was happening, this was easing his head-splitting migraine and no one would take this away from him.

The human underneath him had buckled while he lavished her with scratches and kisses, ensuring to not pierce her again and dilute the pleasure with her blood.

He pressed the palm of his hand over his mouth, hiding a smile as

she

glared right at him from across the classroom, noticing every darting look before the final bell rang. Todomatsu couldn't withhold a teasing smirk as

she immediately walked to his desk, placing her hands on the back of his chair and desk in an effort to keep him in place.

"I saw them," She breathed out, leaning close with a glare of disapproval, "What did you do to Yurie?"

"I did very little," Todomatsu hummed as he leaned back a little, keeping his voice low while students left in a rush to celebrate the last week before graduation, "What has she told you?"

"Some...very

inappropriate

things."

"They were," He admitted easily, "But I only did it to alleviate my own suffering."

"By having sex?" She scoffed before standing up, her brow pinched in disapproval, "...how many times?"

"Every so often. No more than once within 90 days."

She said nothing as she moved to grab her school bag, her torso heaving with deep breaths. When she came back to him, she grabbed Todomatsu's arm and dragged him along.

They walked out of the school, Todomatsu obediently following her steps as she slowly released his arm.

"Why would you betray me like that?" The sorrow was thick on her voice as his expression softened, "Why...?"

"I didn't see many options open to me," Todomatsu was honest, "These awful headaches have been plaguing me since we started high school, driving me up the walls until I found a way to relieve myself of them, albeit temporarily."

She looked back at him as they stopped on an empty street, the sounds of civilization around them, "I thought...you could only feed from me."

"I didn't feed on them, really," He took a step closer, adjusting his bag over his shoulder as he kept eye contact with her, "The blood that I tasted was disgusting. I only picked Yurie so much because I didn't get violently sick whenever I bit her."

I couldn't find the lie in Todomatsu's eyes, struggling to understand why he did everything Yurie confessed or why he felt the need to do things to

them

but not me. Before I could react, Todomatsu's arms were around my shoulders in a gentle embrace while his cheek pressed against mine.

"I was afraid to ask you," His voice was soft on my ear, "It's something I've recently learned about and didn't want to scare you away."

"I'm

your

blood bank, Todomatsu. You'd only suffer if I fled."

"Did you want me to show you what your friends experienced?"

The question sounded innocent, but there was something in the manner of how he asked that made me worry that everything between us would change if I agreed. If I didn't...would that condemn him to suffer alone?

I only found the strength to nod, my throat dry as I waited for whatever it was he wanted to prove.

The brush of his lips against my cheek drew a blush to my face, my eyes closing instinctually as he peppered a trail of kisses down to my neck where the scars of his teeth rested. His breath was hot, his tongue gentle as it licked across the scars, his fangs painless as they pierced the thickened skin. My fingers tensed as the familiar suction pulled at my veins before a new

sensation flooded my nerves, sapping my strength at the heaviness it carried.

A rush of desire, a demand of seduction.

A call of weakness, a commanding sensation that had no end.

I opened my eyes to see Todomatsu holding me close, our position now sitting against one of the walkway walls that branched from the street. My heart pounded with exhilaration as I regained my breath.

"When I give someone a dose of my saliva, it transfers my emotions to them," Todomatsu's voice was soft in the silence beyond my heartbeat, "I have always been able to sense someone's emotions through their blood, but if I don't do this regularly, I get migraines."

His statement caught my attention.

"You've known...about my emotions?"

Todomatsu only looked down at me as one of his hands lifted up to my cheek, caressing it with a thumb. I could feel his bite throb while my face flushed.

"Yes, I've known how you felt about me since I started feeding on you," The confession caused me to cover my face with my hands, "I was unsure of how to proceed since...this kind of situation isn't smiled on."

"No one has fallen in love with their bank before?" My words were muffled.

"It's like an unspoken taboo," He hummed, "Something about becoming too attached."

I remained still as he held me close, desperately wanting my thoughts to calm down from their racing pace.

"I've...had indecent thoughts about us since we started experimenting on where you could feed from," I confessed as I lowered my hands to rest on

his forearms, leaning back against him, "I didn't think it would be acceptable since no one else said anything and I started to distract myself, focusing on after school clubs and teams that kept me away from you intentionally."

Silence surrounded us like a blanket as I gathered my thoughts.

"Is it...okay to let this happen?"

"You mean for me to feed on your friends, or for me to release into you?"

"For what you just did to me."

"I've wanted to do that for quite a while, little dove."

My mind skipped as my tongue worked on its own, "Can you do that again?"

Todomatsu was quiet before his lips rested near my ear, "Are you sure?"

I nodded, not trusting my words anymore.

His tongue wiped away any drying blood on my neck, his fangs easily sliding back into the previous bite mark. I clutched at his forearms tightly as his heated desire for

me

chased my nerves, my mouth opening in a silent gasp while my chest filled with as much air as it could.

Todomatsu poured every lustful thought into me, every teasing motion that he knew I liked, every fantasy he had dreamt of in bed alone.

"I want you."

His voice echoed in my head, every word digging itself deeper into my mind as I felt fingers dance across the buttons of my uniform shirt. Another

pair of hands clasped over them tightly, restraining them as I opened my eyes to see Todomatsu's hands holding my own back.

"Not here, little dove. You'd hate yourself."

His warning sent a ferocious blush to my cheeks as I quickly fixed my attire before standing up. Todomatsu followed me, taking my hand and leading me to some dark place, the scenery blurring into itself as I could only stare at the vampire that

needed

me.

A door closed somewhere behind us, Todomatsu standing close behind me as his hands pressed my waist against his, his fangs burying in my neck again.